

WASHINGTON, DC - Congressman Steny Hoyer today signed a petition to force the full House of Representatives to consider a common sense proposal that would give the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) the power to negotiate lower prescription drug prices on behalf seniors enrolled in Medicare. This provision was eliminated from the Republican Medicare legislation signed into law at the end of last year. This petition would also guarantee that HHS offer at least one nationwide Medicare-administered prescription drug benefit.

"For years, seniors have been demanding a real Medicare prescription drug benefit that is affordable, universal, and guaranteed - but their demands have fallen on deaf ears. Instead of valuing their straightforward requests to lower the skyrocketing cost of prescription drugs, Republicans served seniors with a confusing and illogical plan that outrageously prohibits the Secretary of Health and Human Services from negotiating lower drug prices on behalf of the 40 million seniors enrolled in Medicare.

"Such sensible negotiation would save both seniors and the government money, and is currently practiced at the Veterans Administration (VA) and every other private insurer in the country. However, Republicans have taken no action to implement the same cost saving measure for seniors.

"Families USA, a non-profit, non-partisan organization focused on providing high-quality, affordable health care for all Americans, found that such negotiation saved the VA over 40% on the most commonly used drugs by seniors.

"On the whole, the badly flawed Republican prescription drug plan passed into law at the end of last year simply fails to bring down the cost of prescription drugs.

"The prescription drug cards program, the first program in the law to go into effect, has failed to provide any significant discounts, and has caused tremendous confusion for seniors as they attempt to navigate between numerous private plans, all of which are permitted to change their drug prices and the drugs they cover every week. **This confusion is a telling sign of what is in store for seniors when the rest of the law goes into effect in 2006.**

In contrast, the petition I signed today would provide seniors with at least one guaranteed Medicare-administered drug benefit, with a \$35 monthly premium, that won't vary from region to region.

"Under this bad law, seniors are in no way guaranteed health coverage or more affordable prescription drugs. **In fact, Maryland seniors will be left worse off under this plan.** A story in the New York Times today stated that 'new government estimates suggest that employers will reduce or eliminate prescription drug benefits for 3.8 million retirees when Medicare offers such coverage in 2006. That represents one-third of all the retirees with employer-sponsored drug coverage, according to documents from the Department of Health and Human Services.'

In Maryland, that means that between 60,000 and 70,000 seniors will lose the employer-sponsored prescription drug coverage they currently enjoy.

These seniors will be left to rely on the inferior drug benefit contained in this bill, and end up having to pay dramatically more for their prescription drugs.

"I will continue to fight for common sense measures like allowing the government to negotiate drug discounts on behalf of the 40 million beneficiaries already enrolled in Medicare, and allowing seniors and people with disabilities to import safe drugs from Canada, which would result in real savings for seniors and lower drug prices nationwide. Signing this discharge petition is a good step in the right direction."

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